

The Latest Adventures of the Wonderful Cleek ::

By T. W. HANSHEW

"MY DEAR CLEEK," the hastily written message ran. The enclosed letter has just been delivered here by public messenger, and as it is to judge by the notes on the envelope—apparently a matter of some moment, I hasten to send it on to you by Lennard. In the event of the letter having been delayed, both Lennard and the limousine are at your service. Yours cordially, "MAVERICK NARKOM."

Cleek laid the note aside and took up the letter which had been enclosed with it.

"Humph!" he mused, as he turned the envelope over before opening it. "From a lady, that's certain—elderly, well educated, used to being obeyed, and in considerable of a hurry and much excited when she penned this. Well, let's see what she has to say for herself," tearing the letter open—"and what has induced her to write to me."

She had very little to say, but that little was of the utmost importance.

"Lady Rivington will be obliged if Mr. Cleek will make it convenient to call upon her at the Langham Hotel not later than 2 o'clock this afternoon upon a matter of life and death. She also requests Mr. Cleek to say nothing regarding this appointment to anybody, and will be obliged if he will not come in uniform."

"The good lady's first dealing with the police," commented Cleek with a smile. "She evidently fancies that detectives go about in the garb of constables—helmeted and numbered with the badge of their calling. What's the time? A quarter to one, eh? I can take the kit bag and change in the limousine, and give her ladyship something in the nature of a shock 'not later than 2 this afternoon.'"

He did, and so it fell out that it still lacked some minutes of being 1:30 when, following an announcement, "Mr. Johnston, your ladyship," there walked into the private drawing-room of Lady Rivington's suite a straight-backed, fair-haired, fair-mustached man of soldierly bearing.

Lady Rivington, seated upon a sofa and interestingly studying a railway time-table, turned round as she heard the name, saw him and rose in some perturbation.

"Pardon," she said in confusion. "I fancy there must be some mistake. 'Not unless Lady Rivington has changed her mind since the letter was written,' replied Cleek, just the suspicion of an amused smile flickering about the corners of his lips. 'Your ladyship said not later than 2 o'clock and not in uniform. I have endeavored to comply with both requests.'"

"Oh, but this is incomprehensible. That a police officer—" began her ladyship; then discreetly stopped and had the good taste and the breeding to say no more upon the subject. "Pray sit down, Mr. Cleek, and I will send at once for my nephew, Mr. Charles. It is most good of you to answer my letter so promptly. No doubt you—er—marveled at its abruptness; it is—er—peremptory character, and must have been at a loss to account for it."

"Not in the slightest," replied Cleek, taking in the time-table. "I imagined that your ladyship was compelled to catch a certain train in order to get back to—Emond Court, is it not? I hope my memory is to be relied upon—and I gathered from your letter that this was something in the nature of a secret visit to town; secret, perhaps, even from Sir Maurice, and that the preservation of that secret depended upon your catching that particular train in order to keep your son from learning that you had been to London."

"How wonderful you are!" exclaimed her ladyship, with the amazement of those who are utterly devoid of imagination. "To deduce all that from a mere letter, yes, you are right—you are right in particular, Mr. Cleek. The visit is a secret one. No one but my nephew knows. No one but he must ever know—my son least of all. He would put down his foot instantly if he suspected that I ever dream of doing such a thing—he is so hopelessly under the woman's spell!"

Cleek's eyebrows lifted and fell; the curious one-sided smile looped up the left corner of his mouth, dropped, and was gone before her ladyship could remark it. "I hope I shall not be considered rude, Lady Rivington," he said, "but unless I have been misinformed, and be 'hopelessly under the spell of a woman' is no new experience with Sir Maurice, and especially the spell of—shall we say 'foreign women'?"

"By all means say 'foreign women,'" replied Lady Rivington, with a touch of asperity. "My only satisfaction in the whole unhappy business of his two marriages is that neither woman was English—neither could be English; have one drop of English blood in one single vein and do such utterly un-English things. I wished Sir Maurice to marry his cousin; to keep the title and the estate in the family. And two women—two Russian women—disregarded that wish and spoiled that hope for me. But, she added, glancing round upon him suddenly, "you appear to know a great deal about Sir Maurice, Mr. Cleek."

"No, no; not more than was set forth in the daily papers at the time of his second romantic marriage, Lady Rivington. It was stated then, in my memory serves me correctly, that, in his early youth, he gave great promise of becoming a prominent statesman and was eventually entrusted, despite his youth, with an important diplomatic mission—a secret treaty, so to speak, between the throne of England and that of Russia—and that, in the pursuit of that mission, he was fortunate enough to stumble upon a hitherto unsuspected Nihilist plot against the life of the Czar and to frustrate it upon the very eve of its planned execution. When he came, in time, to return to England he took with him not only the

gratitude of the monarch whose life he had saved, but a gift in the shape of a casket containing jewels of fabulous value. He took something else back with him as well, and the jewels were bestowed because of that. Olga Bashkirtoff, niece of the court physician, he married the lady—whom the Czar elevated to the rank of countess in honor of the union—and returned to his native land a conqueror in more senses than one. One year later, however, his name was associated not with pomp and glory, but with crape and mourning. His wife of a twelvemonth had given him an heir and laid down her own life as the price of that gift."

"It cannot be said, I believe, Lady Rivington, that the marriage was a happy one. Indeed, she had made herself so distinctly unpopular that Sir Maurice was obliged to retire from public life to escape the friction which her temper and her tactlessness continually produced. After her death, however, he returned to the field of politics; again became a 'figure' in diplomatic circles, and, finally, at the end of three years married a quite unknown and penniless girl who was filling the post of nursery governess to the children of one of his political colleagues. History repeats itself ever. This lady, too, was a Russian; her name, Mlle. Vera Strogoft. She was an orphan without a relative in the world or a farthing to bless herself; but what she lacked in money she made up for in the dower of loveliness, being, certainly one of the most beautiful girls existing, and with an air that seemed to belie her humble origin. Evidently, the match was one made in heaven; of true love on both sides, and of complete unity, for the lady has not only proved to be a devoted stepmother to Sir Maurice's little son and heir, but a loving, loyal, and most exemplary wife. That, your ladyship, is all I know of Sir Maurice Rivington's affairs."

"And oh, what a blessing if it were all there is to tell!" replied Sir Maurice Rivington's mother, pressing her hands together and squeezing them hard. "But it is not, Mr. Cleek—it is not." A tremor shook her and her voice trailed off. She set her lips together as if in the effort to repress her feelings, and to regain the mastery of herself.

"But we know—my nephew, Mr. Valentine Cleek, and I—we know! Dear heaven, yes! That is what brings me to London in this secret manner—that is what has sent me to you! Mr. Cleek, listen: I did not approve of this second marriage any more than I approved of the first. In the beginning, I did not like Vera, Lady Rivington—I did not like her at all. But I am a mother. I am a grandmother—my boy and my boy's boy are dear to me; and when I saw how happy she made the one, how tender and how thoughtful she was of the other, I forgot the old dislike. I buried the old resentment and I grew almost to love her. I should have loved her in time, but that I found out the truth. It was his position, his wealth that attracted her. There is another that she cares for more than for him—another man!—and she is killing my son just as I know that she has killed his heir."

"Killed his what? My dear Lady Rivington, what are you saying?" "Nothing but the truth, Mr. Cleek," she made answer. "There is to be another child at last—her child! She wants no other child to inherit; means that no other shall inherit. That is why little Eric did go! It was she who wanted him put in the lilac room; it was she who never rested until he was put in the lilac room! If Valentine and I had not seen other things that leave no doubt—no room for doubt—we should know because of that. The boy has not been kidnapped; it is madness for my son to believe that he has. They have killed him, I tell you—that woman and her lover have killed him!"

Cleek rose to his feet, his lips drawn inward, his eyes narrowed, his brows in a knot. "My dear Lady Rivington," he said in short, crisp tones, "let me have this thing plainly, please. Am I to understand that Sir Maurice's little son has disappeared?"

"Yes. Three nights ago. He was put in the lilac room to sleep by her orders—his stepmother's orders—put in there alone; without nurse or governess to watch over him—and when they came to bathe and dress him in the morning, the window was found open, the bed tumbled and the child gone."

"Good heavens! But why was this not made known to the police? Why have the newspapers said nothing about it? Why has Scotland Yard been kept in the dark?"

"Sir Maurice would not allow any report of the affair to be given to anybody. He believes what she tells him—that woman he has married."

"And what does she tell him?" "That it is the work of the Italian Mafia; that a man broke into her own room that night—two men, in fact; that they woke her and told her at the point of the pistol she would be killed instantly if she made any outcry or did anything but remain perfectly still and listen to what they said. Then, she says, they told her that the child had been kidnapped; and that it would be held for ransom; that, when they had it safely housed and were ready to treat with Sir Maurice for its restoration, they would make known to him the terms and the time, but that if any word were mentioned to the police or any steps taken to trace them before that time came the child would be put to death instantly."

"What rot!" commented Cleek, before he thought. "If Sophie Morrovetski harbors the delusion that all fish are gudgeons—Then caught himself up and snapped the sentence off short, and kept the rest of it behind clamped jaws, as he frowned at the wall and began to rub his chin. After a moment, however, "But—tell me something, Lady Rivington; you spoke, just now, of having dis-

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covered 'other things.' What other things? How were they discovered, and where?"

"There—at Emond Court. My nephew, Mr. Valentine Cleek, and I tumbled upon them quite accidentally a fortnight or so ago."

"But surely you and he are not living there?"

"No—we are on a visit. A most unusual sort of visit. Mr. Cleek—a sort of peace party. I have succeeded in patching up a trifling misunderstanding dating back to their varsity days, and this is the first time that Valentine has met Sir Maurice for years." She stopped—interrupted by a warning tap on the door, and then by the swinging open of the door itself—and Cleek, following the direction of her glance as she switched round and looked across the room, saw that a young, fresh-colored, frank-looking man of about eight-and-twenty, with a weak, womanish mouth and mild womanish blue eyes, had stepped in, closed the door behind him, and was agitatedly advancing toward Lady Rivington.

"My nephew, Mr. Valentine Cleek," Mr. Cleek, interposed Lady

"Hum-m-m! Couldn't be anything else, could there, that he remains in the house—is, in short, one of the servants?"

"Oh, but that is utterly impossible, Mr. Cleek—utterly!" interjected Lady Rivington. "All but one have been in the service of our family for years and years. And even that one for almost a twelvemonth."

"Clever people do nothing by halves, your ladyship, as I believe I have already remarked."

"Yes, but it would be ridiculous to suggest that she—my dear Mr. Cleek, that one exception isn't a man at all. It is an old, old woman—stone deaf, lame; so lame that she can only walk with difficulty, and is badly hunched back into the bargain. She is a most excellent needlewoman, however—a really wonderful needlewoman, in fact—and was sent to me by the sisters of the Convent of St. Ursula with a strong recommendation. Oh, no, there can be no question of old Bertha being anything in the way of a confederate, Mr. Cleek, for I myself recommended her to Lady Rivington. She knew nothing about her before that."

lilac room. It went out suddenly; and we were just wondering what we ought to do in the absence of my son, what it was our duty to do in the face of such a thing as that light in that room at such a time, when we heard the clicking of a lock, and a little door behind the morning room opened and she—that woman—came out with a bundle in her arms. She skipped away, unsuspecting, into the very deepest part of the plantation, Mr. Cleek, and she buried that bundle between two fir trees—buried it deeply, snapped off a little fir twig, shaped as fir twigs always are, in the form of a cross, planted that cross upright over the buried bundle and flew back to the house. When she was gone my nephew and I crept to that spot, dug up that bundle and saw—saw—Oh, ask him! I cannot bear to think of it even!"

"When we dug up that bundle, Mr. Cleek," said Charlock in a hushed voice, "we found that it contained the dress Lady Rivington had worn the night before—was wearing when she carried the sleeping child in her own arms into the lilac room; but it was now smeared and stained with



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Rivington. And Cleek, acknowledging the introduction and accepting the cool, moist, 'dead-fish' sort of a hand which Mr. Valentine Charlock now, if you please, what other suspicious circumstances are there that point darkly to Sir Maurice's wife? What is the 'lilac room'? And why should it be regarded as undesirable that the boy should have been put to sleep in there?"

"Look here, Mr. Cleek," impulsively blurted out Mr. Valentine Charlock, without any preface whatsoever. "I hope Lady Rivington told you that I am not a willing party to this day's proceedings, and that I would sooner cut my tongue out than have to tell you what she says it is my duty to do. He's a good fellow, my cousin, Sir Maurice Rivington—a clinking good fellow. It seems a—clinking good idea to me that this—strike him through the wife he loves and trusts—after the way he's acted toward me, and I'm not proud of it, I can tell you. And I don't believe—I simply won't believe—that she's done anything to the child or that she's other than a faithful wife—to my cousin in spite of all that my aunt and I have found out, and that looks so rotten black against her."

"Pleased to hear it, Mr. Charlock," commented Cleek. "But tell me something, please. What have you discovered that looks so black for the lady?" "She steals out at night and meets some man in the park for one thing," replied Charlock, with apparent reluctance. "She—she admits that man to the house—secretly, after everybody is supposed to be asleep—for another. And when or where, or how she lets that man out there's no telling. My aunt and I have watched for hours—watched until morning, in fact; but he never reappears."

"Ah, then, of course, there can be no mistake, your ladyship, and we can eliminate this—er—Bertha, I think you said the name was. And now, if you please, what other suspicious circumstances are there that point darkly to Sir Maurice's wife?"

"What kind of a knife—what kind?" rapped Cleek with an open show of agitation. "Was it a broad, flat blade sharpened upon both edges and set in a wooden hilt shaped like a miniature dumb-bell and with seven brass studs embedded in the upper knob?"

"Yes, exactly like that. You have described it to a T." "The Seven," said Cleek, twitching back his shoulders and making a snapping noise between the thumb and forefinger of his upturned right hand. "The Secret Seven! Oh, Russia, Russia, what dogs of hell you breed! And I held my peace! I kept silent! I believed—on the strength of my own life, my own reputation—that the serpent's fang might lose its venom if it were steeped in the honey of love! And after all it was still the Secret Seven; still the oath, and Jezebel is Jezebel to the last. Mr. Charlock—swinging round suddenly—"one last question: Where is Sir Maurice Rivington now? Is he still on that wild-goose chase, or has he already returned?"

"No, he has not returned," said Lady Rivington, answering the question before her nephew could reply. "Oh, Mr. Cleek, waxing excited—"a thousand pounds—any price—any in the world—if you can clear this mystery up before my son returns."

"I can, Lady Rivington, and—I will!" said Cleek. "Get yourselves ready for an instant return to Emond Court, you and Mr. Charlock. But not by the train—not at a time when, if followed, your return will be expected. You go with me in the red limousine to the end of a blood-red game that can strike no root and grow in the freeman's soil of England!"

It was night when the red limousine swung out of the close-pressing autumnal darkness to the rear gates of Emond Court, and Cleek, alighting, followed Lady Rivington and Mr. Charlock into the depths of the plantation, and Lennard—obeying orders—whizzed off to the head of the local constabulary in accordance with a request wired down from Scotland Yard before the long journey to Devonshire began.

"Move sharp," Cleek had said to him, as they parted. "Get them here as quickly as possible, Lennard, and don't wait for any further orders from me. One at every mode of egress from the park, remember, and two at the entrance of the house itself. Nab anybody—anybody—do you hear?—that attempts to leave the place. And now, Mr. Charlock," he added, when Lennard had taken this order and gone like the wind to execute it, "now we will have a look at this spot where the bundle was buried; and if it is still there and still undisturbed, we will have a look at that as well."

It was still there, as they came to know when they made their way to the place, and Cleek, taking a small electric torch from his pocket; flashed a spot of light upon it; but it was not undisturbed; the little cry which both aunt and nephew gave when the light blazed out over it told him that at once.

"Look, Valentine, oh, look!" her ladyship breathed in a wavering, excited whisper. "There are two fir crosses, both of them, than the one you replaced after you dug the bundle up. And see! the moss and stones and leaves are not as they were."

"No, they are not!" agreed Charlock agitatedly, as he knelt and examined the ground. "Mr. Cleek, somebody has been here; somebody has dug up the bundle before us."

"I rather expected that," said Cleek, as he handed him the torch and turned up his sleeves preparatory to beginning operations. "It is more than likely that a third digging up is anticipated, but not at such hands as will perform that office now. Hold the light steady, Mr. Charlock; and you, Lady Rivington, stand so that no faint glimmer of it can possibly be seen from the house should anybody be looking this way. We've stolen a march on the enemy as far as that third digging up is concerned. I fancy, or those two twig crosses would not be left here still, and so—now then, we will see what's hidden underneath."

With that he set to work digging up the spot until, "what was there," was uncovered, lifted out and laid on the ground beside him. It was exactly what he had been told, a woman's dress, rolled tightly up into a compact bundle and secured with a bit of string. But there was something more than that; now, for a slip of paper upon which something was written in Greek characters and in a language which neither Lady Rivington nor her nephew could read.

"Russian!" said Cleek, as he took the torch from Charlock's hand and bent over the written slip.

And then, sinking his voice, he translated the message verbatim. It ran: "Daughter of Heroes: Well and truly is it begun; well and truly is the oath kept. Thou art to be trusted of the Brotherhood after all. After the cygnet the swan. Within a twelvemonth, remember—no more than a twelvemonth! And after that thou art absolved. Well done, Avenger! The Seven bow to thee—Malagotski!"

"Malagotski! By Jupiter!" rapped out Cleek as he read that signature. "Ivan Malagotski in England, within grip of my hands at last. Oh, Siberia, what a find for you! Now for a look at the lady's handiwork!" He snapped the cord that bound the bundle, spread out the woman's dress of palest azure silk—a dress all smeared and dabbled with red-brown stains—and holding in its folds a clean new knife patterned like the old one it replaced. He gave not a second glance at the knife (the wording of the note had told him its purpose, warned him for what and for whom it was intended), and would have given the knife a shuddering glance at those gruesome stains as well, but that his eye, trained to look for trifles, saw one now. A mere bit of emerald green fluff not half so big as a man's thumb nail, caught in the beaded trimming on the bodice of the gown, and clearly the tiny, downy breast feather of a bird. He faced round suddenly and looked up at Lady Rivington.

"Tell me something," he said. "Had Sir Maurice's wife a pet parrot—a green parrot? And did it die or disappear on the same night as the child?" "Yes," replied her ladyship. "All in a moment Cleek had bundled the dress back into the hole, was on his feet and had taken off his hat. "Well played, Lady Rivington!" he said with a brightening face and a note like laughter running through his voice. "Come, your ladyship, come, Mr. Charlock, let us get to the house as quickly as possible. For me, the riddle is no longer a riddle."

They rose and went with him. And another surprise awaited him—awaited them all. For, in the open village carrier's spring cart stood, with a little tin trunk strapped upon it, and the carrier himself standing at the horse's head and holding the animal steady so that the bent old woman two servants were assisting down the steps might, when she came to the vehicle, be able to climb up into it. And on the stone terrace above and beyond, Sir Maurice Rivington stood watching the operation with keen and nervous interest.

"Good gracious! Whatever could have happened?" exclaimed the dowager Lady Rivington, as they came in sight of this picture. "It is Bertha—old Bertha actually going out driving; at this time of the night; and from the front entrance instead of from the servants' door. Then she quickened her steps, moved forward until her daughter-in-law saw her,

and, in the seeing, lost instantly the light that but a moment before had glowed in her eyes and irradiated her lovely face. "Vera!" called out her ladyship, in a voice of surprise and reproof, "Vera, whatever does this mean?"

"Bertha is going, mother," replied Sir Maurice's wife. "Going for good and all. Word has just come to her that a nephew in Wales has died and left her some money. Good-by, Bertha, good-by, and good fortune to you always, you faithful old soul!"

Bertha took no notice of anything or anybody, from her dowager ladyship to Cleek, as they advanced, since no one could see what was approaching, if bent in that manner, and it was quite, quite impossible for her to raise her head. But she could see toes, and that, perhaps, was why she moved aside a trifle when a pair of masculine feet encased in enameled boots got directly in her path—and got in it again the instant she did move, and the owner of them said in Cleek's serene, smoothly rounded voice, "Going away, Bertha? Can't be persuaded to stop another night, Bertha?"

But Bertha didn't hear, so didn't answer, of course; merely shifted to get out of the way of the enameled boots, and the enameled boots shifted with her and were more in the way than ever.

"Do persuade her to stop over night, your ladyship," said Cleek, addressing the dowager Lady Rivington.

It was Sir Maurice's wife that replied. "No, no! She cannot stop, she must not stop!" she struck in in a sort of panic. "Bertha, you must hurry, you will miss your train!"

"Aye, aye—mustn't miss train—mustn't!" came mumbling up from the lips of the bowed face and the screen of the deeply-frilled mob cap old Bertha wore. Then she made a step to the other side, and the enameled boots made the same step with her, so it was clear that they really meant to get in her way; and a fit of something like trembling seemed to get hold of her.

"What's the matter, Bertha?" continued Cleek as that mumbling voice sounded. "Got a cold, Bertha? Catch it in Moscow, Bertha? That's where Sophie Morrovetski hails from, isn't it?—Sophie Morrovetski, the Nihilist, who took the oath of the Secret Seven to repay Sir Maurice Rivington's exposure of their plot by wiping him and his entire race out when—No, you don't, you dog!" as old Bertha made a dart to fly past him, and Sir Maurice's wife flung out a despairing scream, faced round and fled indoors.

"Got you, Malagotski! Got you, you damned hound! Take those with the compliments of Cleek!"

Then there was the click of handcuffs, a rumble of footsteps as a pair of constables came out of the darkness at his whistle, a snarl of angry despair as he whirled that skirted and manacled figure over to them, and after that, confusion, panic, pandemonium.

Then he swung round and darted into the house after Sir Maurice Rivington's wife, and following the lead in which her footsteps flew and her wailing cries sounded, ran on and up a shot bolt clashed and—he could go no farther.

And then—then he did a strange thing! For instead of throwing himself against the door and making any effort to break it from its hinges, he dropped on his knees, put his lips to the keyhole and called softly: "Lady Rivington, Lady Vera Rivington, Sophie Morrovetski is dead! She died when I found that blood-stained dress and the feather which told how and why the green parrot was killed. Sir Maurice never heard of her. Sir Maurice never shall hear of her from me. It was love, real love, wasn't it? Love did it! You came to entrap and to slay; you remained to protect and to safeguard!"

From the other side of the door a woman's wailing cry sounded, and after it a woman's broken voice said despairingly: "Oh, the madness of it! Oh, the folly of it! Maurice will shrink from me in horror when he learns."

"From whom shall he learn? I'll never betray you; his mother will never betray you when she hears the truth. I know enough of women to promise you that. Charlock will not speak either; he's a good fellow at bottom after all. Who will betray if we three remain silent?"

"Malagotski," she made answer brokenly.

"Russia will shut his mouth and Russia shall have him, I promise you. He is satisfied that you are loyal; that you have done half the work, and will in time do all of it. He will never betray you so long as he can speak. The parrot's blood on the dress and the knife deceived him as you meant it should. He came to hasten on the work, to hold you up to the oath and to make your life a hell. If father or son were not killed by a certain time as a token of your good faith and loyalty to the cause, he would do the work himself. And so you played that trick with a hidden child and garments smeared with parrot's blood to get rid of the man. That was it, wasn't it?"

"Yes!" she gave answer. "He loves me, dear little Eric! It goes to my heart to have to threaten and be harsh to keep him silent when I steal into the lilac room with food and drink for him."

"He is there, then?" "Yes. At first I carried him up here to my own room and hid him in the wardrobe; afterward I took him back there."

The bolt slid back, the door swung open; she stood before him the very embodiment of woman's woe, and Cleek, taking her hand, lifted it to his lips and bowed over it as a courtier would over a queen's.

"There is nothing on God's earth so good as a true woman," he said, "and heaven send that Sir Maurice Rivington be always worthy of the wife he has won."